

## Ahimsā in Jainism

(N.B.: This material is a copy from an article by Padamnabh S. Jaini)

The Jainas believe, like Hindus, in the existence of a soul which is possessed by every living being. This soul is characterized by consciousness and undergoes continuous changes between various grades of purity and impurity, ignorance, and omniscience. The Jainas conceive that a soul takes up a new body after the death of its present body according to its volitional activities. This is accomplished by the soul drawing toward itself a subtle kind of matter, which then envelopes it and defines for the soul the new kind of body it will receive. The volition force driving the soul is what determines the state in which the soul finds itself. If the soul becomes subject to attachment and aversion, the soul becomes harmful (*hiṃsā*) to both itself and others; if instead it maintains detachment and compassion, the soul comes to be non-injurious (*ahiṃsā*) toward all beings. According to the twelfth-century Jaina mendicant Amṛtacandra, “Assuredly the nonappearance of attachment and other passions is *ahiṃsā*, and their appearance is *hiṃsā*.” The Jainas thus define *hiṃsā* as something that is ultimately linked to one’s personal mental state and involves injury primarily to oneself. *Ahiṃsā* and the awareness of *ahiṃsā* becomes a constant concern for the individual, involving total mindfulness in mental, oral, and physical activities. *Ahiṃsā* therefore is a creed in its own right: identified with one’s own spiritual impulses and informing all of one’s activities, it may truly be called a way of personal discipline.

All members of the Jaina community, both laity and mendicants, consciously undertake to lead a way of life in accordance with the basic tenet of non-violence by removing the volition towards attachment and aversion. The outward expression of this practice is characterized by two explicit schemes of vows and restraints, called minor vows (*aṇuvrata*) and major vows (*mahāvratā*), which are applicable to lay-people and mendicants, respectively. Jaina mendicants were particularly noted for their lifelong vow of refraining from all acts of violence in any form whatsoever towards both humans and animals. The *ahiṃsā* of Jaina mendicants was all but absolute since their mendicant laws demanded it; they had no social involvements that might entail the use of violence and they undertook no governmental or military obligations. The mendicants had no need of a livelihood as they could count on the voluntary support of the lay-people for their legitimate needs. It was therefore incumbent upon them to keep the precept of *ahiṃsā* in its totality. The mendicant was thus the embodiment of *ahiṃsā* and the exemplar of that ideal for the lay-person.

In this context of a social order the Jainas developed a whole set of laws regulating the application of the ideal of *ahiṃsā* in day-to-day life. A great many grades of non-violence were thus accepted within the lay order, allowing the diligent lay-person to progress toward the state achieved by the mendicant. This was accomplished through a series of vows called *aṇuvratas*, which outlined the progressive course to the renunciation of all violence. On the one hand, this course gradually widened the scope of the application of *ahiṃsā* on the part of the lay-person and, on the other, progressively restricted opportunities for violence.

True *ahiṃsā* in Jainism means not only refraining from inflicting injury on others but also renouncing the very will toward attachment and aversion that initiates such violence. In relation to a householder’s life, the Jainas were expected to examine as to whether the householders’ activities were free from *saṃkalpaja-hiṃsā* (harm intentionally planned and carried out), as, for instance, that intention with which a hunter might stalk his prey. Such willful violence has to be renounced in order for one to be considered a Jaina, and the Jaina texts are replete with sermons rejecting all violence perpetrated for sport or in sacrifices, whether sacerdotal or familial.

Adopting a proper means of livelihood thus becomes extremely important for a conscientious Jaina, since the chosen occupation determines the degree to which violence can be restricted. Thus Jaina lawgivers have drawn up a long list of professions that were unsuitable for a Jaina lay-person. Certain Jaina texts forbade, for instance, animal husbandry and trade in alcohol or animal byproducts, leaving only such professions as commerce, arts and crafts, and clerical and administrative occupations. In all these activities, some violence to the lowest forms of life was inevitable, but Jainas could engage in them if they behaved with scrupulous honesty and utmost heedfulness. Injury done while engaged in such activities was considered *ārambhja-hiṃsā* (occupational violence), which could be minimized by choosing a profession like business that was reasonably free from causing harm, as indeed Jainas have traditionally done.

Since meat cannot be procured without cruelty, partaking of the flesh of animals in fact harms oneself by creating a latent effect in the mind of the meat-eater. The acceptability of dairy products, however, did not involve a conflict with the Jaina logic on this point, but was justified because milking a cow, goat or buffalo did not involve any harm to the animal itself. In their belief in the inviolability of all life, the Jainas extended their dietary restrictions to various types of vegetable life as well. In their attempts to categorize those types of plants that could be consumed with relatively less harm, the Jainas developed a whole science of botany that was rather unique in Indian religious

history. For example, eating fruits and vegetables that contain a large number of seeds (*bahubija*), such as figs or eggplants, was not favoured: this was in distinction to fruits that had only a single stone, like mangoes, or vegetables that do not contain individual seeds, such as grains, legumes, and leafy vegetables, which the Jainas did not limit. At the same time, however, the Jainas recognized that plants were the lowest form of life- since they possess only a single sense, that of touch- and belong to a different category altogether from higher animals. Hence, plants could be eaten, provided that they were harvested and prepared with care.

For the Jainas, vegetarianism meant not only being kind to animals, but also being kind to oneself. The fact that a person has undertaken such a regime shows that his soul has not fallen prey to the lusts of the palate. By thus refraining from causing harm to animals or lower forms of life, the vegetarian is accruing merit (*puṇya*) and developing positive mental states that will ultimately be to his own personal benefit. According to Mahāvīra:

“No being in the world is to be harmed by a spiritually inclined person, whether knowingly or unknowingly, for all beings desire to live and no being wishes to die. A true Jaina therefore, consciously refrains from harming any being, however small.”<sup>1</sup>

The Jainas seem to be unique in believing that all animals possessed mind and the five senses- which would include all domestic animals as well as those wild animals that could be trained- were capable of such spiritual sensibilities and must therefore be allowed to naturally evolve toward their destinies without interruption by human violence.

Contrary to the widely held belief that death on the battlefield is almost equal to holy martyrdom, the Jaina answer shows extraordinary courage of their conviction that death accompanied by hatred and violence can never be salutary and must therefore lead to unwholesome rebirths. Jaina view is quite the opposite of what Lord Kṛṣṇa tells Arjuna in the *Bhagvadgītā* when Arjuna showed hesitation to participate in the war:

“Slain, you will attain heaven,  
conquering you will enjoy the earth.  
Therefore rise, O Arjuna,  
Resolved to do battle.”<sup>2</sup>

In sharp contrast to this, Mahāvīra tells the story of two soldiers. One of these two soldiers who ended up in heaven was a jaina named Varuṇa, who had undertaken the *aṇuvratas* of the layman before he was drafted by his king and sent to the front. Prior to his departure, however, Varuṇa vowed that he would never be the first to strike anyone; he would always wait until he was struck first before attacking. Armed with bow and arrow, he took his chariot into battle and came face to face with his adversary. Varuṇa declared that he would not take the first shot and called on his opponent to shoot. Only after his opponent’s arrow was already on its deadly flight did he let fly his own arrow. his enemy was killed instantaneously, but Varuṇa himself lay mortally wounded. Realizing that his death was imminent, Varuṇa took his chariot off the battlefield and sat on the ground. Holding his hands together in veneration to his teacher, Mahāvīra, he said: “Making Jina Mahāvīra my witness, I undertake the total renunciation of all forms of violence, both gross and subtle. may I remain steadfast in maintaining absolute detachment from this body.”<sup>3</sup> Saying thus, he pulled out the arrow and, his mind at peace, died instantly and was reborn in heaven. The second man, a friend of Varuṇa, was himself severely wounded in the battle. Even so, he followed after Varuṇa in order to help him in his resolve and witnessed his peaceful death. He died soon afterwards in the same fashion and was reborn as a human being. Whatever the moral of the story, the Jainas are clear in their belief that a wholesome rebirth is assured only to those who die a peaceful death and who renounce all hostility and violence. Without achieving these qualities, no amount of valour on the battlefield guarantees even true temporal victory, let alone improvement in one’s spiritual life.

---

<sup>1</sup>*Daśavaikālika-sūtra*.iv. #11. English tr. by K.C. Lalwani, Delhi, 1973.

<sup>2</sup>*Bhagvadgītā*.ii.37.

<sup>3</sup>*Bhagvaī*.VIII.9 #302ff (*Suttāgame*, ed. by Pupphabhikkhū, Gurgaon, 1953).